



Testimony by Rhona Free
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On behalf of Elsa M. Nuñez, President
Eastern Connecticut State University
Before the Committee on Higher Education
and Employment Advancement
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Good morning, Senator Bye, Representative Willis and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee. For the record, I am Rhona Free, Vice President of Academic Affairs at Eastern Connecticut State University, speaking on behalf of Elsa Nuñez, President of Eastern. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today. We are grateful for your advocacy for education and the difference it can make, not only for our students but for our state.

I would like to comment briefly regarding Senate Bill 927, "An Act Concerning Requirements for Early Childhood Educators." The bill amends current law, which requires School Readiness teachers to have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development by 2015. Instead, the bill would require that 50% of School Readiness teachers have a bachelor's degree or early childhood certification by 2015 and that one hundred percent of individuals with the primary responsibility for a group of children hold a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, child study, childhood development or human growth and development by July 1, 2020. Eastern supports this law that is consistent with research that indicates that having a bachelor's degree affects the effectiveness of early childhood educators, and also acknowledges the barriers faced by teachers in School Readiness and other community-based programs who wish to obtain a baccalaureate degree.

Research confirms that having a bachelor's degree matters. We know the quality of the support and instruction that children receive in their first five years of life has a direct link to their later academic performance, and that the education levels of teachers is directly related to program quality. Given that School Readiness programs serve the neediest children who are most at risk of having difficulties in elementary school and beyond, it is critical that these programs have the most qualified teachers. Ensuring that all early childhood teachers have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a closely related area is an important goal.

However, teachers who are currently working in School Readiness or community-based programs must overcome financial and logistical challenges to completing bachelor's degree requirements. Extending the date by which all individuals with primary responsibility for a group of children must have a bachelor's degree to 2020 will allow many more teachers to overcome these challenges. Senate Bill 927 also permits the Commissioner of Education to use unexpended funds for School Readiness programs to pay for higher education courses to help staff meet degree requirements. Given the earnings of most School Readiness teachers, we believe that providing financial support

to obtain degrees is critical—most teachers simply are not in a position to pay for courses, especially since obtaining a degree may not translate into a significant salary increase. We strongly support this portion of the amendment.

Eastern Connecticut State University urges the Committee to also consider the need to support program development in higher education institutions to ensure the availability of degree programs that meet the needs of School Readiness teachers who work full-time year-round. These programs could integrate DVD course packages and distance learning modules with traditional on-ground classes to meet the needs of teachers for whom work and transportation issues would make it difficult, if not impossible, to complete degree requirements by attending on-ground classes during normal academic schedules. We urge you to consider including in this bill support for higher education institutions to develop and implement new programs that would best meet the needs of those currently working in School Readiness and other community-based programs. The possibilities are exciting and the need for enhanced teacher training for this workforce is evident.

We, at Eastern stand ready to partner to develop and deliver high quality baccalaureate level course work to this very significant workforce. State-of-the-art facilities in the Center for Early Childhood Education and the Child and Family Development Resource Center enable Eastern to bring unique physical and technological resources to this initiative. Video recording, editing, and production facilities, videoconferencing systems, and connections with Eastern's commercial cable television system and web media server support online program delivery. Early Childhood Education faculty members and teachers in the Child and Family Development Resource Center have expertise that has resulted in development of award-winning training and educational videos and funding for cutting edge research. The physical resources and faculty and staff expertise at Eastern can support development of online, high quality, flexible programming for early childhood teachers pursuing bachelor's degrees.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.